

Capital a 'One-Man Town'

Democratic Process In U.S. Now Seen at Halt, Press Barren

By Patrick O'Donovan
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The pleasure of reporting on this city used to be its complication. American politics is an art form that grows more fascinating the deeper you penetrate. A serious man could spend his life in a delighted study of this most sophisticated and extravagant system.

There was the subtle interplay of White House and Capitol. Occasionally there was a great gun fired from the Supreme Court to put everyone back on the starting line. There were lobbies and pressure groups crowding the executive and the legislature. There were the great figures, Senators, Governors or Mayors, playing the role that was given to kingmakers or white-haired councillors in Europe.

Even when it was boring it was subtle. The interplay of powerful, squalid, great and good men fighting to get their way was a spectacle that commanded a decent attention. The working of a democracy, with all its mechanism — good and bad — exposed, this was a privilege to watch. And suddenly all this hubbub is stilled.

Now One-Man Town

This has become a one-man town. It is partly because President Johnson is so effective, partly because there is no rival on any horizon. There is his brilliant Parliamentary performance on the domestic scene, the fact that he has completed a program designed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt that up to now had been blocked by political maneuvering.

And there remains the fact that this man, who is above all a domestic politician, is faced with the foreign problem that is more intimately terrible

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than any that has faced the United States before. And this is a democracy that is not geared to discuss problems of foreign policy. When these arise, the tradition is that the country speaks with a single voice. And the voice today is Mr. Johnson's.

Washington is like an unwatered lawn that is dying from the roots. You can see it in the newspapers. The great reporters have nothing to report. The columnists have either to ratiocinate or else to write on

trivial subjects. The American press have never been entertaining, but now it is barren.

Liberals Unhappy

It is true the columnists continue to lay down the law in a manner not seen in the British press. It is also true that they are indulging themselves in a sort of intramural controversy. Joseph Alsop, a perfervid defender of the Administration, attacks his enemies as "twaddle merchants," and his opponents talk of the "house-trained" correspondents. It is fun, but it is not the real thing.

And all this time there is this astonishing, ominous silence from the great

domed, law making temple that is set above Washington. The liberal Senators and members of the House of Representatives, Democratic or Republican, simply do not know what to do. Very, very few of them are happy.

But a silence has been imposed upon Washington.

Once upon a time the White House aides were courtiers, were powers and dominions in their own right. They used to talk and

gossip and feed the press in the friendly and enthusiastic service of their master. Now it is more than a man's career is worth for any of these men to say anything to a reporter that matters.

All the talk is about the President. And there is little enough of that. Great and good and responsible politicians simply appear to opt out of one aspect of their public life. They are not frightened. This is not McCarthyism, but suddenly the democratic process, under a most democratic President, seems to have shuddered to a halt.

It would be quite unfair to blame President Johnson. He is intolerant, occasionally angry and demanding of

agreement. He has at his disposal the greatest and best prepared forces that any free country has ever produced in time of peace, and now, in Washington, it is perfectly plain that he and he alone will make the decision on how these forces will be used.

Washington, for the only time in its history, has become a one-man city and all the ministers and advisers who surround him are only his servants.